

Putting Process Improvement **LAST**

If you are a process improvement expert, do you ever feel like a salesman trying to sell a project that no one needs or wants? You know your tools work and they provide significant results in efficiency, cost, satisfaction and return on investment but you can't understand why people are uninterested in listening to your approach.

People who understand and have experienced great results from using the tools of Lean, Six Sigma, and others are passionate about using these tools. The problem is the **PROBLEM**. For our efforts to work, we must find a problem to solve. We see problems everywhere we go! We walk into a restaurant and see a long line at the counter = problem. We look at the supply room and see excess stock = problem. We see dissatisfied customers waiting for a service = problem. Through our lens, problems are seen everywhere, however the people you need to convince to believe in your process improvement are not looking through your lens. Their lens involves the day-to-day operations, the experience they have surviving throughout their career and the pride they have in the successful job they have done and are currently doing. When you walk into their life and explain they need process improvement, you must first point a big finger at them and tell them they have a problem! How did you react the last time someone told you that you were wrong, or you had a problem?



In this respect we should never lead with looking for the problem. Since process improvement needs a problem to solve, the exercise of improving something must come last.

Although there are scores of books that discuss how businesses should be run, there is a very simple approach that can and will lead an organization to a better place. This three-step approach consists of 1) Transparency, 2) Accountability and Ownership, and 3) Process Improvement.

First, we make those things that are important to managing patient care *Transparent*. It is impossible to improve those things that we cannot see, so transparency enables all caregivers to see and understand their current state. Through transparency, we must first identify how the business or process is run, define the measures within that process that are meaningful to the customers and those doing the work, and make these measures transparent for everyone to see.

Second, *Accountability* and *Ownership* take place when meaningful and transparent measures are provided to those who have a direct influence over them. I have never met an employee who came to work and said, "I want to do a bad job today!" Although the word "accountability" has often taken on a negative connotation in business, it is anything but negative. When people feel accountable, they know what they need to do, understand how their work contributes to the overall mission, and personally take pride in how they deliver the service to their customer. As they look back on their day accompanied by transparency in how they performed they can confidently state "I did that!" and so begins the culture of accountability.

The last step in this pathway is *Process Improvement*. Although most organizations start with process improvement and look for a problem to solve, we suggest putting process improvement and all of its schoolbook techniques, Japanese language, and certification acronyms last. Here is where the process improvement expert gets to share their tools. Those doing the work now have transparent measures to define the outcomes of their work, are taking ownership of those outcomes, and seek help and support to achieve their goals. With that said, when process improvement experts are approached to help solve the problem,

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those leading process improvement have significant accountability to support employees in solving problems that they identified.

In summary, employees are aware of the important measures and outcomes (Transparency), take ownership of those measures they contribute to (Accountability), and request the support of process improvement techniques to improve them (Process Improvement).

Last but not least, just because this was described in three seemingly simple steps, they are anything but that. Once process improvement experts are given a process improvement model or steps to follow, most are inclined to organize them into timelines and instructions while mapping out a project plan to get it done. This is not one of those models. Each step must become mature in at least a portion of your business before you move onto another. Accountability and ownership for example, is a culture derived completely by individuals and can only come from within by those doing the work. This could take days, or it could take years but until it is achieved, no amount of process improvement will succeed or sustain.

